

Remnants

by Kukapetal

Category: Half-Life

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2012-01-30 21:51:47

Updated: 2013-11-14 06:59:26

Packaged: 2016-04-26 22:02:41

Rating: T

Chapters: 5

Words: 18,925

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Two tools of the Combine Establishment have an encounter that will send them down an unknown path...and far from the world they know. Is it possible to rediscover your humanity after it has been taken from you...or you've willingly given it up?

1. Chapter 1

Chapter One

Metrocop 87 stood at his usual post outside the food hall in Station 17. He twirled his stunstick idly, wishing someone would come by. Having a stationary post was supposed to be one of the perks of being a mid-level officer, and on some days, he had to admit it was. When the weather was bad or there was trouble from the rebels or increased Combine patrols, he had to admit it was nice to stay inside and away from the action. But the rest of the time, standing in one spot all day listening to Breen's bullshit speeches on the screen in the food hall behind him was excruciatingly dull, and he often missed his days as a low-level officer, when street patrols were mandatory and danger an unavoidable part of the job. Supposedly, those dangerous early years on the job were necessary to weed out men who were unsuitable for the position. Those who couldn't handle the job either died in combat, or the grueling conditions revealed their "unsuitability." Those men disappeared, and Metrocop 87 doubted they had simply been given a pink slip and sent home. No, he and all the others knew where they really went, even if no one dared to say it. It was enough to make those who simply died in combat look enviable.

Which was why he often had to remind himself that it was good to have a mid-level position, as dull as it sometimes was. Not only was there less chance of being killed in combat, but there was less chance of being sent to Nova Prospekt as "raw material." He had proven he could handle the job, and now, only a serious mistake or a severe injury would make him eligible for the trip. Both of which were less likely with a stationary post.

True, the position came with a few drawbacks, other than boredom.

Mid-level officers were required to undergo "minor" memory modification. As far as he could tell, that mainly involved "graying out" his past. He could still remember his early life, a life not unusual for the average man living in these times. The death of his entire family in the Seven-Hour War. Eking by as a maintenance worker for several years before joining Civil Protection for the better life it offered. But now things seemed a little hazy. He no longer clearly remembered his family. Their names, faces, even how many of them there had been, no longer seemed easy to recall. He no longer remembered any incidents of note from his early life either. No birthday parties, no high school graduation, no first kiss, nothing. Just bland monotony that hardly seemed to be worth thinking about. Occasionally he would briefly recall something of interest, but it always faded almost immediately, like an image from a dream. Not that any of it really mattered to him. He had no need to be troubled by grief for those who were long dead and gone, or to be pained by memories of things he'd lost. It was better to simply scrape by with what pleasures he could take out of the life he led now.

There also came with the modifications an increased "need" for the trappings and identity of a Civil Protection officer, and an increased love of the Combine and appreciation for their "benevolence." The rational part of his mind recognized the latter feelings as bullshit, just a more insidious version of Breen's constant blathering, but he had to admit he found the other feelings a bit unnerving at times. He now felt more comfortable wearing his mask and uniform than going without, and occasionally found himself keeping the uniform on even when he was off duty. He heard that some men even slept while wearing their masks, although he himself had never done so. He didn't plan on it either. Then again, he had never planned to wear his uniform while eating dinner either, but he had done it several times now. He supposed it was only a matter of time.

The final change was perhaps the most glaring one of all. He no longer had a name. He was now known only as "Metrocop 87." Even in his memories, he could remember being called nothing different.

It was absurd, but he accepted it. Supposedly, it was part of the "integration" process, to make the Metrocops more loyal to the Combine. Loss of identity and increased "attachment" to the Combine were the first steps. More modifications supposedly followed upon promotion to the Elite Metrocop rank, although he didn't know to what extent, since the elites were housed separately from the mid-level officers and he'd never had the opportunity to speak to one. None of the other Metrocops he'd talked to had either. However, the rumor passed among his co-workers was that it completely obliterated an officer's identity in order to make him completely loyal to the Combine and prepare him for the eventual promotion to Overwatch soldier.

He shuddered, wondering how anyone could voluntarily sign up for such a drastic career change. Minor memory modification was one thing; most men could live with it and most of them had things they would rather forget about anyway. It was a consequence of the times they lived in. But to completely wipe your humanity away, and worse, to have your organs ripped out and replaced with machines, to have chunks of your brain taken out and have circuitry put in their place, to be turned into a fleshy machine that had no thoughts beyond completing whatever military tasks its masters entrusted it

withâ€¦no, he would never be able to see how anyone could willingly sign up for such a thing. What possible benefit could outweigh the terrible price? Whatever brainwashing they did to the Elite Metrocops must have been veryâ€¦convincing indeed.

Which was why he would never volunteer for a "promotion." He had no desire to join the Elites and risk being made to want something no sane man would ever want. He was happy to be out of the lower ranks, and had settled comfortably into a mid-level position, and there he would stay. All of the perks, and few of the drawbacks. True, he was kept apart from other people when not on the job, his only companions being other nameless, mid-level Metrocop, but he didn't mind so much. It was nice to be above the rabble now, instead of being a part of it, and he had no attachment to anyone or anything from his old life. Of course, that could have been because of the memory modification, but he didn't think so. He doubted he would have become a part of Civil Protection if he had had anyone he didn't want to leave behind.

Yes, he was happy (at least as happy as a man could be in this shithole of a world they now lived in) where he was, and considered it a fine career choice. He could deal with a little boredom and some minor memory modification.

He chuckled quietly to himself, the sound coming out deep and distorted due to the vocoder inside his mask. As if any of them could trust their superiors about anything. For all he knew, every single memory in his head had been swapped out for a completely different one, and just yesterday he had been a rebel named "Bob" who now thought he was a mid-level Metrocop who missed being out on active patrol. Sometimes.

He perked up a moment later when he heard footsteps coming from the nearby stairwell. A few seconds later, a burly maintenance man appeared at the end of the hall, looking both dusty and weary. He carried a dirty shovel in one hand, marking him as a member of the crew that was doing construction work on the storm sewers out front. Metrocop 87 eyed him in anticipation. He supposed he really ought to be thankful for this post. Being right outside the food hall meant that there was always at least a bit of traffic, even between trains. If he had to get assigned to stationary duty, this was certainly one of the better places to get stuck.

He smiled at the apprehension in the man's eyes as he approached the gateway leading to the food hall. Apprehension that only increased when Metrocop 87 remained where he was, blocking the entryway. The man looked an uneasy question at him, as if waiting for him to say something, but Metrocop 87 remained silent. He found doing so unnerved the citizens even more, especially when they finally figured out that they needed to be the ones to initiate conversation.

The construction worker didn't disappoint. "E-excuse me, Officer," he stammered in an unsteady voice. "I'm trying to get to the food hall."

Metrocop 87 eyed him up and down, taking in his dirty clothing and filthy shovel, then looked him once more in the eyes, enjoying it as the man shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "Not like that, you're not," he finally said.

"Y-yeah, Iâ€¦I know," the man said apologetically. He cleared his throat a bit, as if trying to get rid of the nervousness in his voice. "I know I'm dirty, but we only get a half hour for meals and I'm going to bring my ration outside rather than eat it here, so-"

"And you aren't allowed to bring tools inside the train station," Metrocop 87 continued. "The rules are very clear about that." Actually, he didn't know if it was against the rules or not, but it didn't really matter. The man would believe him and he could enforce such a "rule" without any fear of punishment. The Metrocops were encouraged to treat the citizens poorly, and most of them were just fine with doing so. Including him. It was petty, and they all knew it, but it gave them power over somethingâ€¦and that was likely the only taste of power they would get for the rest of their lives. Humans were scum in the eyes of the Combine, but as Metrocops, they were one step above the rest of the scum. Not much to feel good about, but a man took what solace he could find where he could find it. The rest of the citizens either were too stupid to join Civil Protection or didn't have the right criteria. He and the other Metrocops, on the other hand, had proven themselves worthy and they intended to enjoy the benefits that brought. Including the power to make lesser people dance to their tune.

"I'mâ€¦I'm sorry, I didn't know," the worker said. He was beginning to sweat. The rest of his words came out in a rush, as if he knew he had a limited amount of time to explain and save himself from punishment. "We've been having problems with our tools getting stolen, and so we decided to keep them with us when we go on breaks and like I said, I'm just going in there to get my food and then I'll leave, so-"

"You're not going in there at all," Metrocop 87 said, holding out an arm to fully block the way into the food hall. "Even without the shovel, the condition you're in is unsanitary. Get out of here."

"But my ration-" the burly meathead started to protest.

"Do you want a non-compliance citation?" Metrocop 87 asked him, twirling his stunstick for emphasis.

The man backed up immediately. "No, I justâ€¦sâ€¦sorry. It won't happen again."

"It had better not," he told the idiot. "If I catch you in here like that again, you'll be leaving here on the train to Nova Prospekt. Understand?" That was certainly a threat that was beyond his power to enforce, but it made the man's eyes bug out nicely.

"Yes, Sir, I understand," the man said with a rather amusing squeak. "I'm sorry, I'll go right now!" He turned to leave.

"Hold it!" Metrocop 87 said, as the worker turned to leave.

He stopped in his tracks as if Metrocop 87 had pressed a button to turn him off. "Y-yes, Officer?" he said.

"I told you bringing that shovel in here is against the rules. I'll have to confiscate it."

The man's eyes widened and he backed up a few paces, his expression apprehensive. "Noâ€¦I'll get in trouble for losing it."

"Not my problem," Metrocop 87 told him. "You knew the rules. Give me the shovel."

"But I didn-" the man started to say, then stopped, as if realizing that continuing to point out his ignorance of the "rule" could get him in deeper trouble. "Please don't take it," was all he said instead.

"I think you should do what I say," Metrocop 87 told him. "You're lucky this is the only punishment you're getting. He twirled his stunstick again for emphasis.

The construction worker got the point. He handed over the shovel without another word. Metrocop 87 couldn't help smiling at the defeated expression in his eyes. Served him right, coming in here like that. Served him right for not knowing his place.

He realized the worker was still looking at him. He supposed the man was afraid to leave without getting permission. Metrocop 87 almost told him to go, but then hesitated. The "time" display on the inside of his mask told him it was still about a half-hour until the next train arrived. If he was lucky, there would be a few more people stopping by the food hall to pick up their rations, but if he wasn'tâ€¦

If he wasn't, this idiot might be the only entertainment he would get for the next thirty minutes.

He supposed it couldn't hurt to prolong things a littleâ€¦

He leaned the shovel against the wall beside him and then nodded to the construction worker. "All right, you can go," he told the man, chuckling a bit at the naked relief in his eyes. The worker turned to go, not hurrying exactly, but there was a definite anxiousness in his gait as he headed toward the door at the end of the hall. Metrocop 87 let him get about ten steps before adding "On one condition."

The man stopped in his tracks. He turned around reluctantly, as if wondering what else he was in store for.

Metrocop 87 raised his stun baton. He reached over to the full trashcan beside him and causally flicked an empty can of "Dr. Breen's Private Reserve" from the top of the pile onto the floor. There was dead silence as the can hit the floor and bounced twice, before coming to a rolling stop several feet in front of the construction worker.

"Pick up that can," Metrocop 87 told him.

There was shock, utter shock, on the man's face, as if he couldn't believe the absolute pettiness of this new order. His mouth actually fell open slightly.

Metrocop 87 smiled at the man's expression. This was actually one of his favorite ways to piss off the Citizens. No matter how many times he did it, he never grew tired of their reactions. It was funny in a

way. He could beat them, torture them, invade their homes and take away everything they had in the world, and yet, this was the one thing that seemed to get under the skin of every single person he did it to. Even the most resigned of Citizens usually displayed a flicker of anger when reduced to cleaning up after him for no reason other than the fact that he could make them. If he was lucky, that anger made them say things that weren't smart. Which, of course, resulted in more fun.

The construction worker was still standing there, looking at him as if he half expected Metrocop 87 to claim to be kidding. Metrocop 87 had to suppress a chuckle. As funny as it was, he thought he'd save the laughter until after he'd twisted the knife a bit more. It was always more effective that way.

"I said pick up the can," he said, lounging against the doorway as if he owned the entire building. And, as far as this piece of rabble was concerned, he might as well have.

The construction worker looked down at the can, then back up at him. Traces of that sought-after anger were beginning to show in his eyes.

Metrocop 87 flicked his stunstick and heard the familiar hiss of energy as it crackled to life. "Pick up the can," he said, emphasizing the first two words as though he were talking to a very stupid servant. Or a dog.

The thought of a stunstick thrashing must have finally motivated the worker to obey. He leaned over and picked up the empty can. When he straightened back up, Metrocop saw the familiar look of defeat in his eyes and was slightly disappointed. Perhaps he wouldn't talk back after all.

"Now, put it in the trash can," he told the fool.

The man took a step toward the trashcan. Then another. Then he stopped. And Metrocop 87 saw his face change.

The resignation was gone. In its place was fury. Pure, hot, unrestrained fury. It was as though some dam that had been holding it all back had finally broken, leaving it to pour out unchecked. Metrocop 87 barely had time to register the change on the man's face before the can bounced off his facemask and once again hit the floor

He'd thrown it.

The filthy, worthless, unimportant piece of nothing had thrown it at him.

He charged forward, so furious it drowned out all rational thought. His only desire was to hit that defiant piece of human garbage as many times as was possible before his stunstick broke in half. He didn't even care if he ended up killing the fucker. One less filthy maggot in the world. No great loss.

It was his anger that made him fail to register that the man was not running away from him. It was his anger that made him forget that the man was nearly twice his size. It was his anger that made him fail to

notice that the man still wore an expression of fury that rivaled his own.

And it was his anger that proved to be his undoing.

He practically barreled into the stationary Citizen, the latter's bulk the only thing that kept him from bowling the two of them over in a heap. Snarling, he raised his stunstick, still intent on giving the stubborn piece of shit the beating of his life, and then yelped in pain as the man seized his wrist, squeezing it so hard that Metrocop 87 couldn't keep his hold on his weapon. The stunstick clattered to the ground as Metrocop 87 cried out in pain, the sound distorted into a horrid squeal by his vocoder.

Then he saw stars as the construction worker slammed him hard against the gate leading to the food hall. Desperately, he stuck his arms out, trying to push his attacker back, and screamed again as the man grabbed both his wrists and then slammed his arms against the gate, pinning him. Metrocop 87 struggled uselessly, his rage long since having given way to terror. He realized too late that this man could actually kill him, if he so chose. The very idea was so foreign to him that he had never actually considered what to do in such a situation. He had always counted on the citizens' fear of pain, and their fear of authority, to keep them in check. But when anger, when pure senseless fury, drowned out that fear, the confrontation was reduced to its most basic element-physical strength. And this worthless, insignificant oaf was stronger than him.

The man suddenly threw him sideways, knocking him into the trashcan and sending cans and bottles and empty ration packets flying. Metrocop 87 grabbed the edge of the doorway, barely managing to keep himself from toppling over along with the trashcan. Just as he was regaining his footing, he heard a scraping sound.

He looked toward the sound and was immediately brained by the shovel he had confiscated from the worker moments earlier. He screamed and fell to the floor, his helmet emitting the high pitched tone that signified an officer was down and needed assistance. He was down. He needed assistance. He heard the Overwatch Dispatcher listing his location and alerting nearby units to come to his aid, but the voice was broken, distorted. It faded in and out as his damaged helmet struggled to relay the information to him. Already, the various types of feedback the sensors inside his helmet usually displayed to him had become gibberish or disappeared entirely. The helmet was broken.

And, as the construction worker loomed over him, still brandishing the metal shovel, Metrocop 87 realized that his neck would soon be as well.

He pressed both hands against the floor and tried to push himself backwards in a last-ditch effort to save himself. His left hand skidded, but his right found purchase and he slid backward and to the side, just as the man brought the shovel down on him.

He saved his neck, but not his leg. The shovel came down and connected with his right leg just below the knee. He screamed as his shinbone shattered, his agony drowning out every other sensation.

Including his will to fight back or even try to save himself. As he reached down to clutch at his broken leg, still screaming his head off, he knew that this was the end.

And then he heard a loud _clang _as the shovel hit the floor. Heard footsteps as the man started moving away from him. Heard more footsteps, these coming from the food hall behind him. Fast and heavy footsteps, made by booted feet. The other Metrocops stationed inside the food hall must have heard his helmet's transmission and were coming to aid him.

He would have felt relief, if he had been capable of feeling anything other than pain at the moment. In fact, he was beginning to gray out. As his vision swam, as his thoughts became distorted, he was able to register one final thing.

The soft, metallic _clunk _of an aluminum can as it bounced off his shoulder and landed right beside him, thrown, no doubt, by the now retreating construction worker.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

****Forgot to mention that I, of course, don't own the Half-Life series or any of its characters.****

Soldier 17307 reached down and rifled through the pockets of the dead rebel at his feet. One of eight who had been caught in the act of attacking a supply train. It had been a standard weapons raid, something that had been common in the city of late, as the rebels got bolder and bolder, but unluckily for them, the Overwatch had wised up and started putting patrols in the tunnels. Squad 173 had made short work of this particular rebel cell, killing all but three of them. Those remaining three had escaped into the tunnels surrounding them and thirty-seven minutes and eighteen seconds worth of searching had failed to find them. Now the squad had regrouped and was waiting for the maintenance teams to arrive in order to remove the corpses and get the locomotive operational again so it could return to the station. While their leader updated the Overwatch Dispatcher on the situation and requested increased security on every point where the tunnels opened to the outside world, the rest of the squad spent their time searching the rebels in case one of them had anything on them that could be used to trace the location of the various rebel bases around the city or any of the rebel cells hiding within it.

Soldier 17307 pulled a worn and frayed wallet out of the dead man's back pocket. It seemed extremely thin and Soldier 17307 doubted it would contain anything useful. Probably just the usual forged identification papers and passes that the man would need to get around the city without arousing suspicion. Rebels tended to be very careful about protecting their locations. Most of them rarely carried anything beyond what they needed for their tasks within the city. At least, this was what the information in his memory banks told him, given that he himself had no memories of previous searches. Combine Soldiers had their memory banks reformatted almost daily to get rid of extraneous information, which meant that they didn't retain memories of past battles or other experiences. However, the Combine

supplied its soldiers with all the information necessary to complete their tasks, and it made no sense for any of that information to be faulty, so he trusted it. Searches were unlikely to yield anything worthwhile, but still had to be performed. Even a slight chance of finding a rebel base was worth a look.

"Attention Squad 173!" barked Elite 17300, the leader of their squad. "We have a possible location on one of the rebels who escaped!" At these words, Soldier 17307 and the other seven members of their squad stopped what they were doing and looked at Elite 17300, awaiting further information.

"The Overwatch Dispatcher has reported an attack on a Metrocop in the Train Station, right outside the Food Hall," Elite 17300 told them. "Given the proximity to our location, it seems likely that it could be one of the three escaped rebels," the Elite told them. "We aren't waiting for the maintenance team any longer. We'll proceed instead to the station for investigation and possible apprehension of the target. Fall in!" he finished, gesturing them to follow him as he ran down the tunnel toward the station.

Soldier 17307 quickly stuck the dead rebel's wallet into his belt pouch to inspect later and fall into formation behind Elite 17300 and his fellow squad members. They soon emerged from the tunnels and into the station itself. Citizens and even Metrocops balked at them as they made a short leap out of the pit that housed the train tracks and onto the platform. The Metrocop guarding that particular gate practically fell over himself to get it open in time for the group of them. They didn't need to show any identification papers or passes in order to get into the station. Combine soldiers always had the right-of-way, and answered to no one, except perhaps, another squad.

Elite 17300 led them through a short maze of hallways and chain-link fences until they arrived at a high ceilinged hallway with a metal gate at one end. Three Metrocops were standing together near this gate, engaged in animated conversation. There was an overturned garbage can on the ground beside them, and something lying stretched out on the ground beside it. As Soldier 17307 got closer to it, he realized it was another Metrocop. Most likely the one who had been attacked, judging by how he was clutching at his leg and moaning. None of the other Metrocops were paying any attention to him, seemingly more interested in their own conversation.

"Enough with the chatter!" Elite 17300 barked at the group of them. "Give me an update!" The three Metrocops instantly shut up, and one of them, likely the highest-ranking member of the group, stepped forward.

"He was attacked by an unidentified assailant," the Metrocop told the squad leader. He gestured to a dirty shovel that was lying on ground a few feet away. "With this. We only caught a glimpse of the attacker, but he was dressed in ordinary Citizen's clothing, had short brown hair and appeared to be roughly six feet tall. I sent two other CPs after him, and they've reported to me that he jumped into a storm sewer outside the building that was open due to maintenance. They lost him in the tunnels."

Soldier 17307 silently processed this information while he waited for his squad leader to issue a command. There was nothing in that

description that indicated the assailant was a rebel, and indeed, the rebels they had been fighting had all been wearing combat vests. It was possible that the man had changed into ordinary clothing to allow him to blend into the other Citizens during his escape, but given how none of the other rebels had had any spare Citizen's clothing on them, Soldier 17307 has reasonable cause to doubt that. Perhaps this attack was an unrelated incident coincidentally taking place within the same time period. If so, they had wasted valuable time, and tracking down the three escaped rebels was going to take much more time and resources because of it.

The sound of running footsteps made him turn his head toward the end of the hall. Another Metrocop had just come inside and was heading toward them

"What did you find out?" the lead Metrocop asked him as he approached the group of them.

"The assailant has been identified as Citizen 17500948," the other Metrocop replied. "He was working with a group of maintenance workers on the storm sewers outside. The others identified him to me and said he had gone inside the Food Hall to pick up his ration, then came running out a short time later and jumped into the tunnels. He must have gotten into an altercation with Eighty-se-er, with the injured Metrocop during that time."

Elite 17300 immediately turned away from the Metrocop he had been talking to and placed his hand on his helmet as he spoke to the Overwatch Dispatcher. "We followed a false lead. Subject was merely a disgruntled maintenance worker. Three remaining targets still at large." He was silent for a moment as he listened to the Dispatcher's reply. "Affirmative," he finally said, then turned back to the rest of his squad. "This mission is concluded. We are to return to the Citadel to await further orders."

"What about him?" one of the Metrocops asked, kicking at the Metrocop who was still lying on the ground. The fallen CP moaned slightly.

"What is his status?" Elite 17300 asked.

"Busted helmet and busted leg," the Metrocop told him. "I doubt he's going to be returning to the force. Can you deal with him?"

Soldier 17307 looked back at the wounded Metrocop. He wouldn't be referred to by that title much longer. Broken limbs almost always ended a CP's career. They took too much time and resources to heal, and even healed, they often left the individual with a limp or other handicap, reducing their fitness for duty. Such an officer was almost always better used as raw materials for other projects.

"Deal with him yourself," the squad leader told the Metrocop. "We have better things to do."

"Aw, c'mon!" the Metrocop whined. Soldier 17307 looked at him in surprise. It was highly irregular for a CP to talk back to anyone who ranked higher than him, since it put them at risk of disciplinary action.

Elite 17300 had the same reaction, turning and fixing the Metrocop

with a pointed stare that made him back up a few paces. "Are you arguing with me?"

The Metrocop shuffled his feet, the action making him look a bit like the Citizens he and his kind were famous for harassing. "N-no, Sir," he said, much more contritely. "It's just thatâ€¦we aren't allowed to process anyone who's at the same rank or higher than us. We'd have to wait for an Elite Metrocop to come out here to do that. And in the meantime, we'd have to stay here with him," he continued, nodding at his injured co-worker. "The whole thing's a waste of time and resources. Things that are better put to use on increased security for this area. We still have to worry about those escaped rebels, after all. It's best if we do what we can to minimize any potential public disturbance. If you or one of your squad members took care of this issue right now, we'd be able to move along with what really matters."

Elite 17300 looked at the Metrocop for a moment more, as if processing the information. However, Soldier 17307 knew their squad leader would come to the same conclusion he himself had. Despite the lead Metrocop's insolence, what he had said made sense. Speedier processing of the wounded Metrocop was in everyone's best interest.

Which was why he wasn't surprised when Elite 17300 nodded. "All right," he said curtly, then turned from the Metrocops to face his squad. He glanced over them briefly, the single red eyepiece on his helmet eventually coming to rest on Soldier 17307 himself. "17307, take the Metrocop to one of the interrogation rooms for processing. Once you're finished, you can leave him there, as long as you inform one of the others to put him on the next train to Nova Prospekt. Afterwards, rejoin us at the Citadel. I have a feeling we're going to be given a new assignment shortly, given our failure at fully destroying the rebel squad back in the tunnels."

Soldier 17307 nodded and changed his objective. "Yes, Sir." He told the squad leader, then started forward. The Metrocops who were standing near the doorway immediately got out of his way, leaving their injured comrade lying alone in the middle of the floor.

"D-do you need one of us to show you where the interrogation rooms are, Sir?" one of the Metrocops asked him.

Soldier 17307 shook his head. "No, I know where they are." He had maps of all major areas of the city in his memorybanks. "Just make sure one of the rooms is empty when I get there."

The Metrocop nodded. "Yes, Sir!" he said, then began speaking to someone via his helmet. Clearing one of the rooms out, no doubt.

Soldier 17307 ignored him and moved toward the injured CP. Behind him, he heard the footsteps of the rest of his squad as they exited the hallway. Hopefully, this issue wouldn't take too long to resolve and then he could rejoin the rest of his squad and find out his next objective.

/ / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / /

Metrocop 87 had been drifting in and out of consciousness ever since

the other Metrocops had arrived in the hallway. He had long since lost track of how much time had gone by, and was no longer quite sure of what was happening or who was around him. He also didn't know how bad his injury was, and what little bit of his mind he still had left to devote to rational thought, the tiny bit that wasn't currently dealing with the screaming pain shooting up from his leg, was terrified to find out. He knew what a debilitating injury meant for a CP like him.

He wanted to feel the break to assess the damage, to see if maybe it wasn't as bad as it felt, but the pain made it impossible. And for that, he was almost grateful, since as long as he didn't know for sure the extent of the damage, he could allow himself one small speck of hope that maybe it wasn't as bad as it felt. That maybe this injury wasn't career-ending. Because if it was, he knew that what was waiting for him wasn't a cozy retirement and a steady pension. No, what waited for him was the very thing that haunted the nightmares of every man and woman in the city. And facing that fear at this moment was impossible. His mind was already stretched to the breaking point by agony. He had to allow himself the comfort of "if not hope, than at least a delusion."

"It might not be that bad..."

But the cold harshness of the reality he lived in denied him that comfort. There was a sharp, metallic "crunch" as a booted foot came down just inches from his face, crushing the empty can that was lying beside him. The dim alarm bells that were going off in his head increased in volume when he saw that the boot was not the polished boot of a Metrocop, but instead a heavy, dusty combat boot, most which was hidden underneath the cuffs of worn gray trousers.

A low, meaningless sound of terror escaped his lips when he looked up and saw the hulking shape and glowing blue eyes of a Combine soldier looming over him. Without a word, the soldier leaned over and seized him, hoisting Metrocop 87 up and slinging him over his shoulder. Metrocop 87 cried out in agony as his broken leg swung freely, bouncing painfully against the padded armor covering the Soldier's chest. The Soldier paid him no heed and soon the two of them were moving away from the Food Hall, Metrocop 87 still moaning in pain. Behind him, he heard one of the other Metrocops laugh.

"Where are you taking me?" he managed to say through a cloud of pain. The question was unnecessary; there could only be one place the Soldier could be taking him, but he needed confirmation. Whereas before, the uncertainty had brought him comfort, now, as he was carried down a narrow hallway usually restricted to imprisoned Citizens, it brought him nothing but terror.

"Nova Prospekt," the Soldier replied, confirming his fears. "You are too injured to continue as a CP. I am stripping you of your rank and registering you as new recruit into the trans-human arm of the Combine Overwatch."

"No..."

They would cut him open. They would pull out his organs. They would slice into his head. They would carve up his brain and fill it with wires. They would open his throat and take away his voice. They would cut off his...

"No!" he protested, despite knowing it was useless. "No, no, they can't! It wasn't my fault! That worker did this! It's his fault! Punish HIM! NOT ME!"

But his protests were useless and he knew it. "Punishment" had nothing to do with it. This had nothing to do with right and wrong or who deserved it and who didn't. This was merely a consequence of the ugly reality they all lived in. Of the unfeeling masters they lived under. He was no longer of use to them. A random occurrence had stripped him of his usefulness and now he had no more choice over his fate than a condemned Citizen. Both of them were simply put to better use elsewhere. It wasn't personal.

It just wasâ€¦

He cried out in terror and desperately tried to seize the chain-link fence they were now passing. He only managed to get two fingers through the metal loops before the Soldier harshly jerked his hand away, nearly tearing his glove off.

He moaned and clutched at his now throbbing fingers with his free hand as the Soldier turned a corner and passed by two other Metrocops, who turned their heads curiously toward the pair of them. Metrocop 87 didn't know who they were. He was moving to quickly to get a clear view of their numbers. But he knew it didn't matter. They may have once been co-workersâ€¦.perhaps even friends, but in his current situation, he knew that neither would lift a finger to aid him. He was no longer one of them. He was no longer anything but "raw materials." A non-person. Their familiar masked faces were suddenly impersonal and menacing. What was once the face of the Citizens' oppression had become the face of his oppression too.

He whimpered as the two of them turned away from him and started down the hall, leaving him feeling more alone than he had ever felt in his life. It was just him and the Soldier now. And soon, even the Soldier would be gone, having "processed" him and gone on his way. Then there would be nothing but an empty pod on a razor train and future of pain and terrorâ€¦.and then slavery as a brain-damaged drone.

He cried out again, unable to keep his terror in check. This couldn't be happening! This couldn't be how things would end! Everything had been the way he wanted! An hour ago, everything had been fine! He hadn't done anything wrong! He couldn't make this trip! This wasn't fairâ€¦.it wasn't _right!_

But then, right and wrong were something he hadn't cared about in a long time. Why should he expect anyone else to care about them now that it was his life on the line?

The Soldier must have decided he'd had enough of Metrocop 87's noise. He brought up an arm and smacked his broken legâ€¦.not hard, but enough to make agony shoot through the dangling limb once more.

"Keep quiet or I'll do that again," the Soldier said over Metrocop 87's moan. Tears sprang into the former Metrocop's eyes as he bit down on his lip, trying to keep his screams inside. He couldn't bear the pain in his leg much longer.

His legâ€|

His leg! And suddenly, Metrocop 87's panicked mind happened upon a last desperate straw. Not much, but it was something to grasp at. And something was better than nothing.

"My leg," he managed to get out, as the Soldier turned another corner. "My leg is ruined. If I can't be a Metrocop, I can't be a Soldier either!"

The Soldier continued on without a hitch, heading down a narrow hallway lined with doors, a hallway that Metrocop 87 recognized as the Interrogation Wing. "Not everything in the Combine Army needs its lower limbs," was all the Soldier said as he entered one of the Interrogation Rooms.

Metrocop 87's mind needed only a single, cold moment to understand. To remember that there were worse things made at Nova Prospekt than Soldiers. To realize what fate awaited him.

Metrocop 87 started screaming, just as the heavy door slammed shut behind him.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Soldier 17307 dumped the screaming Metrocop in the corner of the interrogation room. The human's screams intensified in pitch, although Soldier 17307 didn't know if that was due to increased fear or increased pain. He didn't care either. As long as the Metrocop made it to Nova Prospekt in one piece, his stress levels were irrelevant. Doing his best to tune out the CP's noise, Soldier 17307 sat down beside him and got to work. The sooner he got this task finished, the sooner he could rejoin his squad and find out his next objective.

He reached out and grabbed the Metrocop's right arm, twisting it so he could read the identification number on his armband. Number 87. He then released the screaming CP's arm and turned his attention to accessing the Overwatch Network via his helmet. The helmets of all Overwatch personnel were always directly connected to it, and since the Soldiers' helmets were also connected directly to their neural circuitry, they could access any part of it with only a thought. Now, Soldier 17307 sifted through a few general data screens until he found the Civil Protection database.

He requested access, and there was a quick flash across his field of vision, as the identification chip in his brain was scanned by the network, verifying his identity. A moment later the database opened up, revealing a long list of numbers separated by city, sector and rank. He scanned through them quickly, finding the one he wanted fairly easily. He changed the Metrocop's status to "inactive," the time period to "permanent" and finally, under "reasons given" listed "Injured-shipped to Nova Prospekt for repurposing."

That finished, he exited the Civil Protection Database and then located the registry for Nova Prospekt recruits. He entered the Metrocop's identification number there as well, alerting the staff at

the prison that he would be on the next razor train that arrived. Finally finished, he exited the Overwatch Network and a moment later, his field of vision cleared to show the interrogation room once more.

His task completed, Soldier 17307 changed his objective once more. He would leave the Metrocop here for the others to load onto the train and would return to the Citadel, locate his squad and find out what his next orders were.

Just as he began to rise to his feet, a gloved hand seized his arm.

"No, no, don't go!" the Metrocop cried, hanging onto him tightly. His vocoder made his panicked cries sound almost painfully shrill. "Please, no, you can't do this! Please, I don't wanna be a Stalker!"

"You have no choice," Soldier 17307 replied, shaking the man's grip loose. The human cried out again and reached for him, but Soldier 17307 batted him roughly away.

"No, no, no! Please, please, oh God, please don't let them kill me! They'll cut me open! Please, oh please, don't let them cut me up!" The Metrocop appeared to have completely lost his senses. From the choking, burbling sounds coming through his vocoder and the unevenness of his breathing, Soldier 17307 guessed he was weeping as well. Another of those strange, useless things humans succumbed to when frightened. Just like panicking or calling upon some god who never materialized. Sometimes they even lost control of their bowels and messed themselves too. He almost shook his head at the thought. The former Metrocop would have a rather uncomfortable trip to Nova Prospekt if that happened.

But the new recruit wasn't his concern any longer, regardless of what happened to him. Soldier 17307 got up, kicking at the former CP when he reached out and tried to latch onto his ankle. The human rolled backward with a wail and Soldier 17307 turned to go.

"No, don't go!" the former Metrocop screamed at him. "Please, please, don't leave me!"

_Please don't leave meâ€| _

It hit him so hard that for a moment, he thought his neural circuitry was malfunctioning. It was a thoughtâ€|and yet it was unlike any he had ever had before. In fact, he only classified it as a thought because he didn't know what else to call it. There was no precision and no clear flow of information. Instead, it was a hazy image. It was a faint voice. It was a vague feeling.

It was a helpless, trembling human form he held in his arms. One that was too terrified to move, one that was too weak to fight back against the danger that surrounded them both. One that could only cling to him for protection and beg him in a frightened voice, thick and uneven with tearsâ€|

Please don't leave meâ€|

Soldier 17307 stared down at the sobbing Metrocop with wide eyes. The

human was no longer trying to hang onto him but had instead huddled into a helpless ball of misery and terror. He was shaking uncontrollably, just likeâ€|

Just likeâ€|

Likeâ€|

Like what?

Soldier 17307 shook his head violently, as though trying to clear it, but whatever that strange thought had been, it was fading. It was disappearing, leaving him with nothing but an intense sense of bafflement.

And thatâ€|_upset _him.

He wanted it back. As strange as it was, it had pulled at him. He had wanted to do what that helpless voice had asked more than he had ever wanted to carry out any set of orders he had been given. And his entire existence revolved around carrying out orders. It was what he was meant to do.

How could something be more important than that?

In desperation, he went searching for it, searching across all his neural pathways and circuitry, probing the depths of all his memory banks. But he came up with nothing. Everything there was clear-cut and exact. Precise nuggets of information. Neat and orderly trains of thought.

There were no vague feelings, no hazy images, no faint voices. There was no desire to do something he had never been ordered to do. It was almost as if the strange thought had not come from within his neural circuitry at all.

But if not, where _had _it come from? And, more importantly, where had it _gone?_

Soldier 17307 stared down at the terrified Metrocop, feeling almost as helpless as the doomed human looked.

"What did you _do _to me?" was all he could say.

The Metrocop made no reply other than incoherent sniveling.

"What did you DO to me?" he roared at the wounded CP. The Metrocop screamed and tried to shrink away from him, but Soldier 17307 dropped to his knees and seized the human, shaking him like a ragdoll. "What did you do? Tell me what you did! I need to know! I needâ€|Iâ€|I needâ€|"

He trailed off helplessly. What did he need?

Did he need anything at all?

Or did he _want?_

Soldier 17307 caught his breath. The various sensors that monitored his stress levels were beginning to give him readings that he usually

only saw in the heat of combat, but he didn't need to see them to understand that something was terribly wrong. Something within him was broken. He didn't know how it had happened or why, but he began to suspect that he was even more damaged than the CP he still held in his grip. Perhaps irreparably so.

And even more strangely, that all seemed quite unimportant right now.

No, what he cared about right now was that faint but powerful thought. He wanted it back.

He looked at the frightened CP once more. "Do it again," he finally said.

Once again, the human made no response. He was too caught up in his own fear to even comprehend that Soldier 17307 had given him a direct order.

"I said, 'do it again!'" he shouted, shaking the Metrocop once more. "Do it again! Make it come back! Make it come back! Make it come BACK!"

The CP finally snapped. "Let me go! Let me go! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he howled, struggling to free himself from Soldier 17307's grasp. "Oh God, please let me go! Let me go! I wanna go _home_!"

Soldier 17307 savagely pulled the struggling human back toward him, pinning the Metrocop against him, forcefully holding the man's arms down so he couldn't struggle. The terrified human cowered in his arms, huddling against him and seemingly trying to make himself as small as possible.

This time, it hit Soldier 17307 so strongly that he recoiled as if struck by an unseen assailant.

Tears. Terror. Danger. A slender form, huddling in his arms. Clinging to him. A form he wanted to comfort, to hold close to him, to protect. A human. Helpless and frightened and important to him. More important than anything. So important, in fact, that the feelings it brought out in him were fiercer than anything he had ever felt before. The desire to act on them almost consumed him.

He ached to reach out and comfort whoever it was, to take them into his arms and soothe them and promise them that everything would be all right. He wanted it more than anything. He found himself gathering the helpless human into his arms, cradling the delicate form against his chest, encircling it with his powerful arms in a fierce, protective embrace.

The human kept struggling, kept crying, kept whimpering. The human's heart raced with panic. Its body shook with fear.

These things were utterly unacceptable. He didn't know why, nothing within any of his databanks or neural pathways explained why this was so. But he knew—no, he _felt_ that it was wrong. That he had to remedy it. And thankfully, the solution proved just as intangible and yet just as forthcoming as the knowledge of the situation's unacceptability. He didn't know how he knew what to do, but he did.

It was within him, somewhere. Somewhere that his neural circuitry didn't reach, but that he could go nonetheless. Closing his eyes, he tuned out all competing thoughts and simply let it guide him.

His hand slid downward, stroking the human's neck, brushing against the tough cloth of its vest as he caressed its back. His other arm tightened his embrace, drawing the human nearer, close enough to feel the heat radiating off its body, heat that had been built up, no doubt, by its panicked struggles earlier. Still letting instinct guide him, he gently rocked the helpless form in his arms, nestling it against his chest as he did so. He felt it cling to him tightly, and he responded with words. Words he could never remember saying, but that were there nonetheless.

"You're safe now," he told it. "You're safe. I'm here and everything's all right now. Don't be afraid. Shhhhhh, don't be afraid."

And slowly, ever so slowly, his efforts began to pay off. The human's breathing and heartbeat began to slow. Its trembling subsided and its sobs trailed off into quite sniffles. He could tell it was still in distress, but the distress was lessening. As long as Soldier 17307 kept doing what he was doing, it would eventually be all right.

Soldier 17307 did so, ignoring everything else. Civil Protection probably needed this room back soon, and his squad was still waiting for him at the Citadel, but Soldier 17307 didn't care. The time display in his helmet ticked off pointless seconds, then minutes, but he ignored them. They were unimportant. All he wanted was this.

The loud rattle of an arriving razor train at the platform outside finally shook him out of his contented fog. His eyes flew open and he was shocked to see the time display in his helmet telling him that nineteen minutes and eight seconds had gone by since he had last looked at it. It had felt like so much less. He raised his head and was startled to feel moisture sliding down his cheeks. Before he could even begin to wonder about what such a thing meant, the form he held in his arms stirred, causing him to look down at it. And he was shocked all over again.

This wasn't the human who had been important to him. Although the strange vision was still far from distinct, and he could still not recall the size, age or even the gender of the human who had mattered to him, he was fairly certain that it had not been a full grown male in full CP attire. This was not the human he had wanted to protect. This was a wounded Metrocop who was being sent to Nova Prospekt for Stalkerization. Likely via the razor train that had just arrived outside.

The Metrocop seemed to know it too. Already, Soldier 17307 felt his heartbeat begin to race and his breathing rate increase. Instinctively, he tightened his arms back around the CP, drawing him near once more. The rational part of his mind still knew that this wasn't the human from the vision, but Soldier 17307 still felt an almost overwhelming urge to protect him anyway. He didn't understand why, but it was there. Perhaps it was because, even though Soldier 17307 knew that he had wanted to protect the human in the vision, he didn't know if he actually had or not. Had he saved that human from whatever danger there had been? Or had he tried and failed?

He honestly didn't know. There was no further information, not even the vaguest idea of what had happened next. All he knew was that someone had mattered to him and he had wanted to protect them. Still wanted to protect them. Without resolution, it was as if the event was unfinished, as if he had never completed it, as if it was still right there, waiting for him to make the right decision. To act on the overwhelming instinct that filled him when he looked down at the doomed human.

The razor train outside let out a long, lonely whistle, signifying that it had stopped and was ready for passengers to be loaded onto it.

The CP whimpered and clung to him. Soldier 17307 looked down at him and felt moisture running down his cheeks once more.

"Please," came the Metrocop's voice, managing to sound weak and wispy even despite the vocoder that distorted it. "Please don't let them take meâ€|"

"I won't." The promise went against his orders, and by doing so, went against his very reason for existence, but Soldier 17307 only felt a great relief once the words left his mouth. "I won't let them take you. I promise I'll protect you."

And then Soldier 17307 did something that until now, he hadn't even thought he was capable of. Even though no superior had ordered him to do so, and even though it did nothing to help and advance the Combine establishment, he did it.

Soldier 17307 changed his objective.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

****Sorry for such a long delay.****

Soldier 17307 looked down at the still frightened human, already formulating a plan. He would have to be quick about it though, which meant there was little time to go over the details in his mind. It was a gamble, and relied mostly on being fast and staying ahead of the ruckus he was going to cause, but it was the only chance the human had. If the two of them were caught, the Metrocop would be sent to Nova Prospekt, and Soldier 17307 captured and marked as defective. Which he almost certainly was. Then he would probably be disposed of, since the Combine had little reason to bother with defective units. There were always fresh Soldiers being made at Nova Prospekt, after all, so it made no sense to waste time and effort on Soldiers who needed more than just rudimentary repairs when they could simply be replaced. But even if they did somehow manage to repair him, he knew they would wipe his memory, and then he would forget the human. The idea distressed him even more than the idea of being disposed of did.

The razor train outside let out another whistle, reminding him that he needed to get going.

"Listen," he told the still-sniveling Metrocop. He shook the human's shoulder slightly to get his attention. "I'm going to carry you onto the razor train, but I'm not going to leave you there. We'll get off on the opposite side and go into the tunnel. From there I think I can get you out of the city. But you have to stay quiet. If you call attention to us, it won't work. I need you to remain as calm as you can. Can you do that?"

The Metrocop looked up at him dazedly, as if he couldn't quite believe what Soldier 17307 was saying, and Soldier 17307 had to shake him again before he finally gave a feeble nod. Soldier 17307 could only hope that was good enough, because there wasn't time to go over it with him again.

"All right, I'm going to disconnect your helmet then," Soldier 17307 told him. That would be expected and wouldn't cause any suspicion, since Metrocops usually had their gear removed and confiscated when they were sent to Nova Prospekt. And it would keep their soon-to-be pursuers from tracking the Metrocop's whereabouts in the tunnels. It was Soldier 17307's own helmet that was going to prove to be a problem. But he didn't need to worry about that until they got into the tunnels.

He flipped a panel on the back of the CP's helmet open to reveal a group of red, green and black wires. There was no information in his memorybanks about how Metrocops' helmets functioned, but there was plenty of information on how his own helmet worked, and he was certain the two would be similar. The second green wire from the left was the one he wanted. He gave it a strong tug and it popped free with little resistance, severing the Metrocop's connection to the Overwatch Network and the Citadel's monitoring systems.

He flipped the panel closed and got to his feet, wishing for a moment that he wasn't wearing a helmet so that he could wipe the moisture (tears?) from his cheeks. He wasn't going to waste valuable time taking the helmet off though. The liquid would dry soon enough. In the meantime, no one could see his face.

He bent down and hoisted the Metrocop back over his shoulder. The human whimpered, probably because of the pain in his leg, but there was nothing Soldier 17307 could do about that right now. Escaping was the important thing.

"Stay quiet," he told the Metrocop again, then headed for the door.

Once outside, he passed easily through several holding areas, the Metrocops who guarded them letting him through without a single word. He was a Soldier and outranked them, and they knew they had no business stopping him. Not that any of them would feel much like doing so, even if they could. They saw the Metrocop slung over his shoulder and Soldier 17307 got the feeling that they didn't like seeing any reminder of what could potentially be their own fate someday. He could sense a distinct discomfort in them as they opened the chain-link gates and let him through.

The two of them finally passed through the last of the holding areas and stood before the narrow, but tall and imposing, locomotive. Soldier 17307 turned and entered the first prison car, his boots clanging loudly as he went up the three metal steps.

The car seemed even narrower inside than it had looked outside. There was only a single, narrow walkway lined on each side with rows of cylindrical metal holding units. Each unit had a small, thick window near the top and inside, there was a single, narrow bench built into the wall. He walked over to the first one and pressed the button to open it.

It slid open with the soft whisper of well oiled machinery. Soldier 17307 heard the Metrocop beginning to whimper at the sound.

"Stay quiet," he told the human once again. "I told you, I'm not leaving you here. I'm just making our escape a little more convincing." He pressed the button again and the door slid closed and locked with a soft click. A red light over the window came on, signifying that this pod was occupied by a prisoner.

Now came the tricky part. There was another door at the far end of this car that opened onto the other side of the train. There were no platforms close by on that side, so there should be no one to see them get off. If the two of them could exit the train and make it into the tunnel without anyone seeing them, the hardest part would be over.

Soldier 17307 walked to the other end of the car, wincing slightly as he accidentally bumped the Metrocop's injured leg against a holding pod as he passed. He heard the human inhale sharply and stifle a groan, and he made a mental apology to him. The walkways were narrow.

He reached the doorway and poked his head out. No one outside. He looked both ways up and down the tracks. No one at either end. The nearest platform on that side was far enough away that the people working there were only tiny, indistinct moving shapes. He doubted they would notice him, or be able to tell he was carrying anything even if they did.

"All right, we're going," he told the Metrocop. "No matter what happens, I need you to stay silent."

There was no response from the injured human, and he took that as a sign the man understood. Hoping for the best, he leapt down the short set of steps and began sprinting toward the tunnel for all he was worth.

The distance, surely only a hundred yards or so, suddenly seemed like it was miles. The train station suddenly seemed huge and roomy and filled with millions of people on all sides, watching and observing them. The pebbles under his boots scraped so loudly as he ran that he felt certain everyone in the entire building could hear them.

Then everything in his field of vision was suddenly bathed in a cold, sterile blue light as the darkness of the tunnel surrounded them and his nightvision goggles clicked on. He ran about 50 yards further inside to make sure he was out of view of anyone outside, then stopped to catch his breath.

From his shoulder, he heard the Metrocop whimper.

"It's all right," Soldier 17307 soothed him. "You're safe." Well, that

wasn't completely true, but the two of them were safe for the moment. No one knew they were in here.

He started further down the tunnel. There was a T-junction 200 feet in that was used for maintenance equipment. The map of the tunnels in his memory banks told him that taking the right fork would eventually lead them to a maintenance entrance on the edge of the city that was small and unimportant enough that it was likely manned by a single guard. It seemed like their best bet for getting out of the city safely, but Soldier 17307 didn't go that way yet. First, he needed to make his own disappearance a little more convincing. He turned left.

"I'm going to set you down for a minute," he told the Metrocop once he had gotten about twenty feet down the tunnel. The human's breath hissed sharply as Soldier 17307 set him down so he was leaning against the wall, but he didn't make any other noise. Good.

Soldier 17307 re-accessed the Overwatch Network via his helmet, then logged once again into the registry for Nova Prospekt recruits. A moment later he had deleted Metrocop Number 87 from the records. No one at the prison would be expecting him now.

That finished, he logged out of the network once more, than turned to the Metrocop, who was huddled against the wall, trembling and clutching his broken leg. Soldier 17307 felt another insanely strong urge to soothe him, just as he must have done to the human who had mattered to him long ago, but he knew he couldn't give into it now.

"I'm going to talk to the Overwatch Dispatcher now," he warned the human. "And then I'm going to fire my gun and scream. When that happens, I don't want to hear a single sound from you. You're supposed to be on the train right now, and I need everyone to believe that's true. Understand?"

The Metrocop gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod. He didn't look up.

That would have to be good enough, Soldier 17307 decided. He took a few steps further down the tunnel. Then he reached behind his head and flipped open the panel on the back of his helmet. He was ready.

"Come in, Overwatch Dispatcher!" he shouted into the mouthpiece inside his helmet. "I am investigating the sound of gunfire in the tunnels right outside the train station. Repeat, investigating the sound of gunfire North Maintenance Tunnel 54. Suspected rebel activity. Requesting b-"

He cut off his sentence with a gasp, hoping it sounded realistic enough. Then he raised his rifle.

"SHIT!" he screamed, as he fired his gun down the tunnel, into the empty darkness. One, two, three shots. As soon as the last one had left the gun, he lowered it and reached back to the open panel in his helmet. His hands closed around the wire that connected to his life support feed to the Overwatch Network.

Then he screamed and pulled the wire free. The echoes of his scream

were immediately drowned out by the high pitched tone from his helmet that signified the cessation of his vital functions. He was "dead."

As he heard the Overwatch Dispatcher's voice come over his radio, listing his location and requesting backup, he moved his fingers slightly to the right, and grabbed the thicker wire that connected him to the Overwatch Network. He yanked that free as well, and watched the triangular icon on the inside of his helmet feed that represented his connection to the Network disappear. Losing contact with the Network was a fairly common occurrence in dead soldiers whose helmets had gotten damaged. No one would suspect anything out of the ordinary if it happened to him as well.

He was off the radar now. Both of them were.

Now he had to move. The Overwatch dispatcher was surely sending reinforcements into this tunnel already. He needed to be gone from here before they arrived. And there was very little time. The first wave of support would almost certainly be from the Metrocops in the train station. They were very close by. He and the Metrocop needed to get out now.

He sprinted back to where he had left the Metrocop and found him cowering against the wall, his arms wrapped around himself, trembling visibly. Soldier 17307 seized him and threw him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. The human cried out in pain, despite Soldier 17307's earlier warning, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He tore back down the tunnel and crossed the train tracks, sparing a glance back toward the train station (no one in the tunnels yet), and then started down the southern side of the tunnel as fast as he could run.

He passed two corridors on his left, then one on his right, all of them narrow and dark and not part of his planned route. He wanted a wider junction about three-hundred feet ahead. As he ran toward it, he finally heard the loud, echoing crunch of multiple pairs of boots in the tunnels behind him. The Metrocops had arrived. But he was sure he had gone far enough down this tunnel that they wouldn't be able to see him from the tracks, and besides, they were all going to head left, in the direction he'd told the Overwatch Dispatcher the rebels were in. The direction of his last communication with his superiors.

He finally reached the larger tunnel and turned left, still running for all he was worth. He could feel himself tiring a bit, but knew he had enough strength to go on for a while yet. The monitors inside his helmet were still reporting good numbers.

Now he came to another set of train tracks, these running perpendicular to the first pair he had crossed, and he turned right down the tunnel, staying to the side of the tracks in case a train came. Razor trains were very fast, and often, by the time you heard one approaching, it was already too late to get out of the way. He considered looking up the train schedules for that day before he remembered that he was no longer connected to the Overwatch network. And never would be again, if everything went well. That was going to take some getting used to.

He was now far enough away that he could no longer hear any sounds

from the Metrocops back near the train station. They were likely all still down the north end of Maintenance Tunnel 54, chasing shadows, but Soldier 17307 knew they wouldn't stay down there forever. Once they discovered no rebels, they would fan out in all directions, sweeping the tunnels, searching for them. They would come in this direction eventually.

But it would be a slow, thorough sweep of every tunnel, nook and cranny in this direction. Meanwhile, he was running on a distinct path, trying to get to his destination as quickly as possible. It would take them much longer to cover the same ground he was covering.

Besides, they were Metrocops. They lacked the skills and discipline that a squad of Soldiers had. That would cause them to take even longer. And while Soldier 17307 was sure that a real Overwatch squad would join them eventually, he suspected it might not be for five or ten minutes more. There hadn't been any other squads near the train station, last time he'd checked. There was time. He followed the tunnel as it made a wide curve to the left.

On and on he ran, working his way south, following the map in his head. He heard no pursuit, and hoped it would stay that way. He ducked down another tunnel, crossed another set of tracks, turned right at another junction. On and on, not daring to let his concentration waver for a second. If he missed a turn or made a mistake in counting corridors, he'd end up lost. And although he knew he could use the map in his memorybanks to get unlost eventually, he knew that that would waste precious time. Time they didn't have.

There was a muffled scream from somewhere in the darkness behind him—far behind him, from the sound of things, but it was often difficult to tell with the acoustics in the tunnels. Someone was fighting something? Did a Metrocop succumb to friendly fire, he wondered? They were bound to be jumpy as they searched the dark maze of tunnels. Perhaps they one of them had mistaken another for one of the phantom rebels they were chasing.

Or maybe it really was rebels. He hadn't forgotten that they had lost track of the escaped members of the rebel cell in these very tunnels earlier. It was, after all, the reason he'd come up with this particular diversion in the first place. For all Soldier 17307 knew, they were still in the tunnels. For all he knew, they were right ahead of him, or waiting around the next corner. And he wouldn't be able to defend himself if he did blunder into them by accident. Carrying the Metrocop had left him without a free hand. He wouldn't even be able to raise his weapon before they shot him down where he stood.

He picked up his pace a bit, as if that would somehow protect him. But it was really all he could do. He couldn't fight, so his only hope—both of their only hope, lay in getting out of these tunnels as quickly as possible. And hoping they didn't bump into anything nasty on the way.

Like rebels. Or Metrocops. Or Soldiers. Or, even worse—

There were things in these tunnels that made men with guns look positively benign. At least with humans or Soldiers, there was a chance of talking your way out of trouble, or surrendering and trying

to escape later. But the other things that sometimes lurked in the darkened tunnels under the city could not be reasoned with.

Parasitics, hiding in the shadows, ready to leap out and dig their fangs into your head. Or their victims, Necrotics, shambling toward you with their twisted arms raised and their inners glistening in their open chest cavities, never faltering, never tiring in their single-minded desire to seize you and tear you apart. Even Biotics sometimes showed up in the tunnels near the city's limits. The restrictors around the Citadel usually kept them out of the inner parts of the city but the closer to the perimeter you got, the greater the chance of encountering one. And if they did encounter one, they were almost certainly doomed. Even smaller Biotics were a challenge for a Solider to defeat, and the larger types were capable of taking out entire squads.

The thought of them tearing into the humanâ€¦his humanâ€¦was even more unbearable than imagining his former comrades dragging the man away screaming to Nova Prospekt.

He picked up his pace, despite the fact that his shoulder was beginning to ache and his breath was growing labored, and his helmet was emitting several warning alarms as his vital signs began to edge into the danger zone. He had to get the human out of here before something terrible happened to him.

He skidded around a corner and had only a moment to see the brick wall in his path before he slammed into it at full speed. Both he and the Metrocop screamed as they bounced off the wall and fell over in a heap.

He was already trying to get to his feet, even before the room stopped spinning around. He had to get back up, he had to backtrack, he had to find the way out, they had to get out, they had to get out, they had to get out had to had to had to had toâ€¦

His arms slipped out from under him as he tried to push his upper body off the ground. He tried to get purchase with his legs, but they slid back weakly. He collapsed back onto the ground before he had even gotten even a quarter of the way back up. His body was stunned and dazed and exhausted. It demanded rest.

Somewhere nearby, he heard the Metrocop sobbing, although whether from pain or fear, he didn't know. He reached out blindly, trying to find the human by feel, if only to reassure him that he was still there, but he couldn't locate him in his field of vision, and he was too tired to twist his body to look in any other direction.

"I'm here," he told the man instead, hoping the sound of his voice would soothe the human. "We'llâ€¦we'll go on again soonâ€¦.but right now, I need to rest. We'll go on inâ€¦in five minutes." Was that really enough time? Twenty minutes didn't seem like enough time, given the state he was in, but the Metrocops in the tunnels behind them weren't going to wait politely for them to catch their breath. Five minutes.

There was no reply from the Metrocop, other than more crying. Aching to comfort him but knowing that he didn't have the luxury right now, Soldier 17307 tried to ignore him and concentrated on going over the

map of the tunnel system in his memorybanks. They must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, but he wasn't sure where. Had he miscounted corridors earlier? Turned left when he should have turned right? Were these maps out of date? That didn't seem likely, but he wished he could double check anyway. Just go on the Network and find out when they were last updated. He was amazed at how much he took the Network for granted. He felt completely cut off from everything and everyone without it. He feltâ€|lost.

So much had changed in the span of an hour. He'd disregarded orders. Given himself a set of new orders. Essentially defected from his Squad, his people, his entire way of life. He knew he could never go back, not after what he'd done. No superior would ever give him orders again. And he had never had to function without orders, without a clear objective. He felt wrong, somehow. Everything felt wrong. And worst of all, there was no one who could help him. By turning his back on them all, he had cut himself off from his entire world. He felt like the only person left in these sinister tunnels, in this decaying city, in this dying world.

"Help meâ€|" whimpered a voice to his right.

Soldier 17307 finally managed to muster enough strength to twist in that direction. The Metrocop lay only a few feet away, one hand clutching his broken leg, the other reaching weakly in front of him as if searching for something.

Soldier 17307 pushed himself to his knees. He wasn't alone in these tunnels, and he _had _an objective. True, it was one he'd given himself, but it still was more important than any other set of orders he'd ever carried out. He didn't know how or why it was so, but it was, and that was enough for him.

"I'll get you out of here," he told the CP. He placed a hand on the trembling human's shoulder and felt his resolve strengthen. "I promise."

He forced himself to his feet, seized the Metrocop, and lifted him back up. Soldier 17307's arms shook with exertion and for one terrifying moment, he was certain he didn't have the strength to get the CP over his shoulder, but he somehow managed and staggered sideways a few fumbling steps as he adjusted his balance. He hit the wall and leaned against it until he was sure he wasn't going to fall over. Then he started back down the tunnel in the direction he had come.

He retraced a few twists and turns until he found what he was looking for. The spot where one of the tunnels crossed a set of train tracks. An easy landmark to start over from.

He turned back in the direction he wanted to go. The map said to turn right at the third corridor on the left. He started back down the tunnel.

There was a soft scuffling sound from the darkness of one of the corridors to his right. The sound of gravel under someone's (or some_thing's) _foot, perhaps?

He ran through all the possibilities his memorybanks offered for what types of creatures might be found in the tunnels. Feline. Canine.

Rodent. Bat.

Metrocops. Soldiers. Rebels. Parasitics. Necrotics. Biotics.

He looked down the tunnel at the endless darkness that stretched out ahead of him. He needed to stay calm. If he panicked, he'd never find his way out of here. He'd never save the human.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, then forced himself to concentrate.

Three corridors down.

He moved. Past the first corridor. Past a rusted forklift that had long since been abandoned, parked at a crazy angle to the wall, as if someone had driven it-

He paused. The forklift hadn't just been parked there. It was actually partially blocking a low-ceilinged tunnel. Likely one that led to a long-abandoned storage area.

It was the corridor he'd missed. Which meant that the next one was the one he needed to take, not the one after that. He gave a heavy sigh of relief, knowing he was back on track. He picked up his pace.

And then, off in the distance, he heard the lonely moan of a razor train's whistle. And after everything else he'd been through, all the real and imagined shadows he'd jumped at, this was what finally broke him.

He tore into the tunnel, sprinting for all he was worth. Down into the darkness, with only the map in his memorybanks to guide him. A left. A right. A junction. Another right. A long curve to the left.

They wouldn't take his human away.

Then it was another right into a long, very narrow tunnel that stretched ahead of him for almost five-hundred feet. It was an opening for pipes to pass through, but it was wide enough for a human. Probably to allow maintenance work to be performed on the pipes. He hurried down it, his shoulders scraping the walls, the Metrocop crying out in pain as he kept being bumped into them. They were almost there. He could see the yellowish glow of artificial lights up ahead.

Then they were out and into a larger, well-lighted corridor. There were two doors on the far wall to his left. One was a wide garage door, likely leading to an equipment storage room. The other was regular door made out of thick steel.

He approached it, and a small, unobtrusive black bubble on the side of the door made a clicking noise, a noise that echoed through Solider 17307's head as the identification chip in his brain was scanned. Then there was a louder click as the door unlocked.

Inside, a short hallway led to a set of concrete steps. He went up them to another door. This one had a window in it and he could see daylight shining through.

He paused to catch his breath. They were almost free. Just a final bit of acting and then one more long sprint. Then the human would be safe. He pushed the door open.

The single Soldier stationed outside whirled around and raised his weapon, then immediately lowered it in shock as Soldier 17307 came staggering out with the Metrocop slung over his shoulder.

"Rebelsâ€¦in the tunnelsâ€¦.need backupâ€¦" he stammered as he faked an injured leg. He didn't have to try too hard, either. It felt like he'd sprained something in his leg when he'd fallen in the tunnels earlier.

The Soldier was already pushing past him, one hand on his helmet as he spoke to the Overwatch Dispatcher. He charged down the stairs, ready to engage the pursuing rebels while he waited for backup to arrive. They wouldn't get out of the city on _his _watch.

They were alone now.

Soldier 17307 turned and saw a wide expanse of brown grass and tangled weeds. The no man's land that surrounded the city.

Beyond that, thick forest.

He looked back. No sign of anyone coming back up the stairs.

He looked to either side. No sign of any other Combine Soldiers. It was as he had suspected. This little maintenance entrance wasn't important enough to have more than one guard.

He looked back toward the forest. It was now or never.

"We're almost there," he told the whimpering CP still slung over his aching shoulder.

He ran. Even as he felt the prickle on the back of his neck that surely meant hundreds of Soldiers had spotted him and were right now taking aim at him, he ran. Even as his legs began to feel rubbery as the last of his fading strength began to disappear, he ran. He was being powered only by the promise he'd made. The promise he'd made so long ago and yet only now was finally being given the opportunity to keep.

Then he pushed past the first clump of tangled undergrowth and into the concealing vegetation. He ran a bit further until he found a small clearing ringed by bushes. Blueberry bushes. Out of season. The unimportant information from his memorybanks flashed by in the background as he leaned over slightly, rested his free hand on his thigh, and caught his breath.

"I think we're safe now," he managed to say to the CP, in between gasps.

The Metrocop's only response was a moan.

Soldier 17307 rested seven minutes longer before he started moving again. He didn't think anyone would come after them, but he still

felt uncomfortable staying so close to the city. He blundered aimlessly through the underbrush for three minutes and eighteen seconds before he found a narrow trail carved neatly though it, narrower than even the tunnel he'd squeezed through before finding the maintenance room. Too narrow to have been made by humans. His memorybanks suggested deer as the likely culprit.

But it was free of obstructions and more importantly, it was heading in the direction he wanted to go-away from City 17. So Soldier 17307 decided to follow it, at least for now. He traveled at a slow walk, all he could manage after expending so much energy, but he would get the two of them to the end of this trail eventually. Then they would rest, while Soldier 17307 decided what to do next.

For now though, he would let the trail decide where they would go. And so he trudged along it, his precious human slung over his shoulder, off into the unknown.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

****Looks like the Twelfth of Never came sooner than I expected
:p****

The pain in his leg was all he could think about. It was the only thing in the world he knew. All the rest of it was just unimportant details against which the pain was set. He wanted it to stop. Indeed he would have given anything to make it stop at this point, even his life. Why had he not wanted to die earlier? He could no longer quite fathom what had seemed so terrible about it.

Every step the Soldier who carried him took sent more agony shooting up his limb, and as for anything below the breakâ€|well, he could no longer feel that. It was as if his foot and lower leg were dead. For all he knew, they were. He wished he could ask the Soldier to just cut them off and be done with it. He wished he could ask the Soldier to just cut the whole damn leg off. He wished he could ask the Soldier to kill him.

Even worse, the pain and movement were making him woozy, and he was terrified he'd lose control of his stomach and vomit. Since he was still wearing his helmet, he'd likely drown in it. He wanted the helmet off, but at the same time, he didn't want it off. His programming still cried out for him to keep it on, and he didn't want to lose something that brought him comfort, even if it was only artificial.

He didn't no what he wanted, but he tried to speak anyway, wanting to articulate his desire for relief, for solace, but all that came out was an uneven whimper. He didn't know if it was because he didn't have the focus to form the words or if he didn't know what he even needed to ask for. There was nothing _to _ask for. There was nothing that could bring him any relief. No doctor to see him. No hospital to shelter and care for him. Not even a bed to lie down on. They had left all those things behind, and now there was only black wilderness around them.

He was thankful that their helmets were equipped with night vision,

at least. Although he'd not bothered to turn his on, leaving the woods nothing but dark shadows against the only slightly lighter sky, the Soldier didn't seem to have any trouble seeing where he was going. Metrocop 87 wished for a surprisingly desperate moment that he was turned the other way, so he could at least see the blue glow from the Soldier's eyepieces. Even seeing that small speck of light would be comforting right now.

Comforting for him, maybe, but he went cold as he realized that those blue eyepieces would be a beacon in the blackness for anyone else out here. He didn't know how far from the city they'd gone, but even if there was no further danger of running into a patrol, that didn't mean these woods were safe. No, in addition to the numerous beasties and creepy crawlies, both native and "introduced" that might be found in this forest, there was also the danger that they might blunder into some rebels. Rebels made their hideouts far off the beaten path, and they were certainly well-guarded. They probably had lookouts and snipers positioned in a wide radius around their hideouts. If they unknowingly even came near a rebel base, they would be ambushed and shot down like dogs.

Everyone and everything in the world was now their enemy. Where could they go? Did the Soldier even have a destination in mind, or was he just wandering blindly?

"Where-?" Metrocop 87 managed to croak out, before having to close his mouth tightly and stave off a wave of nausea. Once it passed, he tried again. "Where are we going?"

The Soldier didn't reply. He just kept trudging along with single minded purpose, barely even registering as a presence, other than his movement, in the darkness.

He supposed he shouldn't have expected an answer. Soldiers were on step away from being machines. They had no thoughts in their heads, other than what the Combine had put there.

But then Metrocop 87 strongly doubted that the Combine had put this order into the Soldier's head. No, this seemed like it was entirely the Soldier's own idea. But how could that be? Soldiers were supposed to carry out orders, not make up their own. Was he broken? Maybe a couple of the wires in his brain had gotten crossed, and manufactured some sort of bullshit agenda the Soldier now felt like he had to follow. Maybe the two of them were going in circles, the Soldier futilely trying to carry out his nonsensical order, trudging along until he collapsed in exhaustion, leaving the two of them to die of exposure.

They were moving up a slope now. A sandy slope, judging from the swishing sound of the Soldier's footsteps, and the way Metrocop 87 could feel the man's feet sliding slightly with each step. And there was a freshness in the air. A sharp wind, cool but not unpleasant, that carried the scent of the sea.

How could they have made it all the way to seashore already? And why? What could possibly be waiting for them there?

He felt something looming over them. He couldn't see it, since he was facing the wrong way, but there was something dark and solid that the Soldier was approaching. A huge rock? A cliff? A building?

As if in answer to his question, he heard the metallic screeching and heavy thud of a metal door. The Soldier carrying him didn't stop to shift position at all, so someone else must have opened the door. They were no longer alone.

"Hello?" he called weakly, and for some bizarre reason, he was relieved when he got no answer.

The Soldier was moving down a hallway that was lit with a dim but warm orange light. All Metrocop 87 could see of it were the walls and floor, and both of them looked to be made of slick, damp stone. There were puddles on the floor that the Soldier's feet occasionally splashed through, but they were the only thing that broke up the monotony.

It was no longer silent though. He could hear the quiet, almost scampering footsteps of someone else walking with them, ahead of the Soldier. And he could hear other sounds, off in the distance but echoing and unmistakable. The slamming of metal doors. A mechanical screeching that made him think of power tools. Shouts and banging. And screams. Long and unrelenting. Sometimes the voices of women, sometimes of men, but all of them screaming on pure, unadulterated agony.

The walls were steel now, the floor tile. Still wet and puddled though, but now the water looked dirty. Not from mud or dust, but what he could only describe as filth. Slime. Scum.

Fluids.

They turned a corner.

The hallway instantly opened up into a huge tiled room with harsh, sterile lighting. The sounds in the distance faded away, but the sound of scampering footsteps intensified and multiplied. There were many people in here with them now.

The Soldier still trudged along with single-minded purpose, taking him into the center of the room. He finally came to a stop as Metrocop 87 heard a voice say "lay him here."

Pain ripped through his leg as he was dumped unceremoniously on a cot of some sort, its flimsy frame screeching in protest under his weight. Their unseen companions drew closer now; close enough for Metrocop 87 to see they were short, almost stooped people in course grayâ€|robes? Gowns? Although their faces were bare, their features looked almostâ€|painted on. Like the Soldier, they barely registered as people rather than mindless automatons. One of them held a huge pair ofâ€|scissors. No, shears. Like the pruning shears he's used back in his days as a maintenance worker, only in much worse condition. The grimy blades were caked with a reddish substance Metrocop 87 was suddenly quite sure was not rust.

A figure in blue was coming out of a dark doorway to his right. A bald, pencil-necked doctor in a light blue surgical smock that was almost unnervingly clean. Unlike the others though, he was not just an automaton made of flesh. No, even though his mouth was covered by a surgical mask, Metrocop could tell by his eyes that the man was smiling at him. It reminded him of the look of a child who has just

been presented with a new, and much asked-for toy.

Wordless sounds of terror were coming out of his mouth. He wasn't even conscious of making them.

One of the robed figures placed its thick, cold fingers on either side of his head and pressed something. A second later, the stink of urine and the acrid smell of antiseptic came flooding in as his mask was lifted from his face.

He cried out uselessly and reached for it. Once again, he knew the reaction was pointless, that he was not a Metrocop anymore, and never would be again, but his programming cried out for it and made its removal seem like an act of such petty cruelty that he wanted to sob.

The Soldier seized both of his wrists and forced his arms back down onto the cot. No, not a cot. A steel table. Cold and wet and slick.

Metrocop 87 struggled, trying to rise, and the Soldier fixed him with a pointed glare, the yellow eyepieces on his mask glowing harshly, as if they wished to burn a hole through him. _Yellow_ eyepieces. Not blue. The blue was on the soldier's uniform instead. Dark blue on light, a familiar color scheme that most men never saw but all recognized nonetheless. It was the uniform of a guard, and Metrocop 87 didn't even need to read the insignia on the armband of the Soldier holding him down to know where he was.

Nova Prospekt.

The doctor nodded to the assistant with the shears. "First take off the leg, and then we'll drain him."

Metrocop 87 screamed as the assistant moved toward him. He struggled madly, but the Soldier was holding him down. He howled in an agony so powerful it was nearly madness as the shears closed shut on his leg, slicing through clothing, skin and muscle and crunching into the bone underneath.

It was wet. He's peed himself. It was wet and it was _cold_ and he was struggling as the shears continued to cut and the pain shot up his leg. The Soldier was holding him down. He screamed helplessly, uselessly, all he _could_ do, but his assailants would not relent.

The lights went out. The hulking figures around him drew closer, widened, seemed to tower over him. The table under him was so cold it ate into his back. The pain in his leg was unbearable. The ceiling was made of stars.

The Soldier was holding him down.

He sobbed and let his head fall back onto the table. It hit not slick steel, but cold and moist dirt. He was lying on the ground. He could feel a rock digging into his back. There were trees surrounding him, and beyond them, the clear night sky. His helmet was gone and the chilly night air made the tears on his cheeks sting.

The Soldier was holding him.

/ / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / /

Soldier 17307 sat beside the shivering Metrocop, stroking his forehead. The man's helmet was off (a fact which had probably aggravated his distress, but couldn't be helpedâ€|Soldier 17307 was afraid the man would drown in his own sick if he emptied his stomach during the one of his fits), and Soldier 17307's medkit was open on the ground beside him. The second of the syringes full of painkillers it contained was now empty, leaving him with only two remaining. After that, he feared nothing would quiet the man when he woke screaming in the night.

The strange thing was, though, that this time the human had not simply awoken crying in agony, like the times before. No, this time the man had been screaming and terrified, although Soldier 17307 couldn't determine what had frightened him. He detected nothing dangerous nearby, and anyway, the human had been asleep, so how could he have reacted to danger even if it had been present? He had gone from sleeping to awake and frightened in an instant. Even stranger, he had seemed fitful and worried even while he still was sleeping, and that made no sense at all. He assumed that the sleep humans succumbed to at the end of the day was not unlike the pleasant Blue Glow that was promised to Soldiers at the end of their daily duties. This glow was where their minds were cleaned up, unnecessary information deleted and any new useful information planted, but the tantalizing image implanted in his neural network promised that it would be nothing but peaceful. It would not be a place where fear would intrude.

Why would human sleep not be the same?

Perhaps it was the same, and the Metrocop was merely frightened because he was disoriented. After all, he had also seemed to be terrified of Soldier 17307 _himself, _something which made no sense. Hadn't Soldier 17307 made it clear he was an ally? Why would a human fear an ally?

But he did know that humans sometimes took a long time to come around after being knocked unconscious in battle, and for a while afterward (sometimes even permanently) they would be slow and sluggish and have difficulty putting their thoughts together. He supposed that sleep might work in a similar way, shutting down their neural networks and leaving them slow to restart. It was possible that the CP had simply taken longer than usual to access his own information about Soldier 17307 and had mistaken him for a random, hostile Soldier. It was the best idea he could come up with, although he knew it was purely speculation. His memorybanks had very little information on human sleep, other than humans' need for at least eight hours of it every twenty-four hour period.

And the CP certainly needed it. Soldier 17307 knew he was getting worse, even without his constant moans of pain and nonsensical terror at nothing. A broken leg was not normally fatal, with the proper care, but Soldier 17307 could not provide the proper care, alone and away from civilization as he was. He couldn't even set the broken bone. He might be able to improvise a splint out of branches, and tie it together with clothing, butâ€|they had no clothing that either of them could spare, not in this cold. And he doubted he would be able to set the break, even if he could make a splint. His knowledge of

doctoring was limited to minor field injuries he could treat quickly with his medkit. He was not a Medic Unit, and even if he were, he suspected Medic Units weren't programmed with instructions on setting broken limbs. As the unfortunate Metrocop had found out, broken limbs were usually not worth treating, not when victim could be easily replaced.

But if he didn't find someone to help the Metrocop, the man wouldn't survive. He'd succumb to shock, most likely, and if not that, then exposure, or gangrene. He needed a doctor, and medicine, and food, and shelter. Soldier 17307 had none of those things, not even something to protect the man against the cold night air and the freezing ground on which he lay. Time was running out, and if he didn't find someone to help them within the next twenty-four hours, and most likely sooner, his human would die.

He wouldn't let that happen. He scanned his memorybanks for an idea, a possibility, a single person or entity in this world who wouldn't be hostile. The Combine was certainly no good. They would dispose of them both. Anyone else in the city would be too frightened to help, and probably wouldn't be any more equipped to deal with the CP's injuries than he was. And they'd never get back into the city without being caught anyway. And, of course, the rebels wouldn't help the two of them, and besides, Soldier 17307 had no idea where to find them.

His memorybanks immediately brought his attention to the wallet he had taken from the dead rebel earlier. Soldier 17307 rummaged around for it in his belt pouch, although he didn't see much reason to get his hopes up. Rebels didn't carry maps to their bases in their wallets when they traveled through the city. He had already gone over this when he'd taken it out of the dead man's pocket.

Still, it was his only hope. He opened it and rifled through the few documents it contained. A train schedule. Identification papers that identified the owner as "Citizen 17500827," a number that Soldier 17307 didn't need to access the Overwatch Network to know was almost certainly bogus. And even on the off chance that it wasn't, such information did him no good. The man's identification number wasn't going to tell him where the rebel hideout was.

Besides those two documents, the wallet was empty, except for a broken piece of a leaf, a bit of stray debris that had gotten stuck inside at one point. He scanned it almost automatically and although it was only a piece of the whole, his memorybanks instantly recognized the slender shape and tapering tip as belonging to a willow. Not so common around the city, certainly. In fact, they were only found in the forested areas to the north of the city, a bit further north than where he was now. It was known that the rebels had a base in these mountains somewhere, probably several of them, in fact, but a willow leaf—that might narrow it down somewhat. Willows tended to be found in wet areas. He quickly sifted through the sketchy maps of the northern areas, a region largely unexplored, and located a spot that might contain such trees. The delta of a decent sized mountain stream that came out of the mountains and emptied itself out into the river shortly before it flowed through the city. The area was marked as being swampy. It wasn't too far into the mountains, either. Maybe there was an outpost of some sort there.

He calculated the distance. He could make it there in half a day, as

long as he didn't run into any trouble. Make it there and thenâ€¦

And then what? Get shot down? They wouldn't let him get close, not if it meant jeopardizing their entire organization. He could try andâ€¦do something to get their attention, to show that he was no threat, but what? And would it help? Even the slightest risk that he would communicate their location to the Combine was a chance they wouldn't take. Of course, he was no longer connected to the Overwatch Network, but they didn't know that.

Then again, that also meant they'd be unlikely to shoot him down, if they could help it. Not if it meant risking his helmet alerting the Overwatch Dispatcher of his location once his life support functions ceased. Most likely, they'd simply hide out and let him blunder by rather than risk any kind of confrontation.

And, of course, even if he did manage to contact them peacefully, who knew if they would even help the CP? The rebels hated them. Soldiers too, for that matter, but CPs especially, were seen as the face of the Combine's brutality. They might be more than happy to let the Metrocop die, or even put a bullet in his head themselves.

Still, he had to try. It was the Metrocop's only chance. He'd go to that swamp, and do something to get their attention. It was a sketchy idea, a bad idea, but it was the only thing he could think of. The only chance his human might have.

"I'll get you there," he said softly to the sleeping Metrocop. "I'll get you there and I'll make them help you. Then you'll be safe."

Then he would be safe, yes. But for the first time, Soldier 17307 wondered what would happen to him? He didn't even know if he could survive being away from the Combine permanently. Food and water were not a problemâ€¦although he was usually fed intravenously through the port in his side during his time in the Blue Glow, he still retained the ability to digest food normally. After all, squads of Soldiers might be out in the field for long stretches of time before returning to the Citadel. But there were many other parts of him that would need maintenance, mechanical parts, circuitry, etc. And how would he clean his memorybanks every night? He didn't sleep like the humans. His time in the machine that filled his head with the Blue Glow was supposed to do that. But now, he would never make it to the Blue Glow. It would forever remain out of reach, promising a reward he would never receive. He wondered how strong the need would grow, the longer he was denied it. Would it drive him mad? If he was not mad already, that was. Would his memorybanks eventually get so cluttered they would become too ponderous to slog through, too slow to function? Would his mind break down and fail long before his body did?

He was going to die. He had barely even paused to consider his own fate in all the commotion earlier, and nowâ€¦here it was. A reality his neural network acknowledged as simply and coldly as it did the time or ambient temperature. He had known he would die if the Combine captured him and marked him as defective, but now he understood that even if he reached the rebels and found safety for his Metrocop, he would still die. It would just be slower.

The numbers inside his helmet display inched up toward stressed levels as he pondered all this, as he came to terms with the weight of what was happening, of what he had chosen. He looked back toward City 17, the lights of which could just barely be made out on the horizon, and suddenly, _desperately_â€|wanted to be there. He ached for purpose, for structure, for the promise of peace when the day was done, for all the things he would never have again. He realized that, much like the CPâ€|he wanted to go home.

He _could_, _he supposed. Leave the Metrocop, return to the city, enter the tunnels, reconnect his helmet and wait. They would find him, and assume he had been damaged in the phony battle earlier, but had survived. They'd take him back, and take him to the Blue Glow-how comforting it seemed!-and clean his memory banks and he'd forget the human and then Soldier 17307 wouldn't mourn him. He wouldn't care that he was lying out here, dying of exposure and shock and misery. He would never even think of him again.

And why not? This wasn't even the human who had been important to him in that strange thought he was sure the Combine had never given him. He was just a substitute. Strip the irrational feelings brought on by the odd vision away, andâ€|this man was _nothing _to him. He was not worth dying for.

And yetâ€|.one look at him, shivering in the cold, racked with pain, and Soldier 17307 could not make himself believe it. One touch of his damp forehead, slick with sweat and warm with his escaping body heat, told him it was a lie. The soft, secret heat of his shallow breath against the Soldier's palm, the gentle curve of his vulnerable neck, the quiet steadiness of his pulse. These things told him the truth. This human was the only thing in the world that _was _worth dying for. He still didn't fully understandâ€|but it was the way things were.

He would carry out his last mission, his last objective, and then, whatever happened, would happen. It still bothered him, but just as he knew there were more important things in the world than what the Combine wanted, he now knew there were more important things than what he wanted as well.

If he had to die in service to one of them, well, perhaps it wasn't such a terrible way to go.

Soldier 17307 turned his back on the city lights and looked toward the darkened mountains in the distance as he sat beside his human and waited for morning.

End
file.